



U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Bureau of Justice Statistics



State and Federal Corrections Information Systems

*An Inventory of Data Elements and
an Assessment of Reporting
Capabilities*

A joint project:

**Association of State Correctional Administrators
Corrections Program Office, OJP
Bureau of Justice Statistics
National Institute of Justice**



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Using the Inventory report

Expanding departments' collection of core data elements 103

Redesigning information systems 104

Cross-jurisdictional research 105

Performance measures 106

Using the Inventory report

The purpose of the Inventory project is to provide a basis for improving the quality of corrections data and enhancing electronic sharing of information. This report identifies the capacity of corrections departments to provide comparable data for performance measures and for cross-jurisdictional research. It describes existing information systems, but does not recommend a model system for all departments or develop a strategy for future actions. The report identifies a common core of data elements that most or all departments collect; describes and analyzes the obstacles departments face in responding to statistical inquiries; and describes departments' capacities for sharing and linking data internally and externally. Additionally, the report provides a list of respondents (Appendix C) that may be used by departments or researchers to obtain information or assistance.

This report may be used—

- *by departments for expanding data collection.* Departments may use information about the availability of the common-core data elements to develop priorities for adding data elements and improving the availability of existing data.
- *by departments to assist in their ongoing information system redesign activities.* Departments in the process of modifying their information systems may use the report to identify commonly collected data elements and to understand how departments differ in their capacities to maintain data in electronic form.
- *by research directors and other corrections researchers to determine availability of data elements in cross-jurisdictional studies.* In designing comparative studies, researchers may use the report to identify the reporting capabilities of participating departments
- *by ASCA members to develop strategies for establishing performance measures.* ASCA members may use the report to develop more specific priorities about measuring corrections performance, to identify indicators based on commonly collected data elements, and to decide what additional information is needed for these performance measures.

Expanding data collection

Departments may use information about the availability of data elements to develop priorities for expanding their data collections. Data collections may be expanded by adding data elements and by improving the availability—their storage in electronic medium—of data elements. Departments using the

Inventory in developing priorities for expanding data collection may wish to consider several related issues.

An advisory committee established priority information areas. The 207 offender-based data elements in the Inventory were derived from the six priority information areas that the project's advisory committee identified. These six areas—offender profile, recidivism, program effectiveness, internal order, public safety, and operational costs—cover the scope of corrections processing and reflect important corrections management outcomes.

The Inventory shows what departments have. The Inventory shows which of the 207 offender-based data elements departments collect and how they maintain the data elements. It shows which data elements are more commonly collected and which are collected by fewer departments. It permits departments to compare their data collection with other departments.

The Inventory's common core is an experiential core. The common core of 100 data elements reflects what departments currently collect and not necessarily what they should collect. Departments wishing to use this experiential core in establishing priorities should recognize that expanding collections up to the existing core will increase the concentration of departments that collect core elements; but it will not necessarily expand the scope of the common core. To do this, departments should consider the entire set of 207 data elements and the six priority information areas.

High-availability formats facilitate sharing data. Maintaining data electronically can facilitate sharing information. This important objective can be met by expanding collections to increase the number of data elements that are maintained in electronic format.

Cross-agency linkages may be a way to obtain additional data elements. Departments may wish to consider developing cross-agency linkages with other information systems as a method for adding data elements. In departments for which core data elements are beyond the scope of the information system that they use to manage adult sentenced prisoners, electronic linkages with other agencies may provide a relatively inexpensive method for gathering data or additional data elements.

Redesigning information systems

The Inventory may help departments establish priorities for upgrading their information systems. It shows areas where improvements are needed in data collection and maintenance, and where problems are faced by many corrections departments in reporting statistical information. The results of the obstacles survey do not suffice as or replace any internal audit of an information system,

but they can point to areas where departments may want to concentrate efforts in MIS re-engineering.

Establishing cross-agency linkages and offender tracking systems. As part of an MIS upgrade or independently of such efforts, departments may wish to consider developing more cross-agency linkages and better systems for tracking offenders. Such efforts may be undertaken in a variety of ways. At a simple level, data extracts can be shared on diskette, tape, or physically transferable media. At a higher level, the capability to query another agency's database could be established. At a higher level still, agencies can participate in an offender-based tracking system (OBTS). An OBTS allows a participating agency direct access to the data for which they have collection responsibility, but only permits them to gain access to obtain data in the system through a specific request to information systems staff or staff from the agency with collection responsibility. At the highest level, agencies could participate in an integrated information system (ITS) that permits sharing of all automated data among all participating agencies. At the levels of sharing below those of the OBTS or ITS, the major problem lies not in sharing information *per se* but in linking it and ensuring that data elements are defined in the same way among information systems. Linking records is greatly facilitated if all the agencies involved use a common identifying number. If that is not feasible, other methods could be developed to link records.

Cross-jurisdictional research

Corrections researchers may use the Inventory to help to identify research topics for and potential barriers to conducting cross-jurisdictional research. In a survey of research units in departments of corrections, researchers identified several important topics for comparative research.¹ These include: studies on recidivism, alternatives to prison, sentencing structures, and evaluations of corrections programs and policies. Many of these topics are reflected in the experiential core of data elements that currently are commonly collected. Researchers interested in topics that are not reflected in the core can use the Inventory to design research and plan data collection activities. As the availability of data elements in electronic form and the resources to prepare extracts or research datasets pose potential problems for conducting research, the Inventory can show when and where these are likely to occur. Researchers can use this information to plan the scope of research and to learn about data systems.

¹Association of State Corrections Administrators Subcommittee on Research. Cross-jurisdictional survey of correctional research offices, summary of findings: Final report, Vol. 1. September 1995. (Prepared by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, Office of Planning, Research, and Statistics.)

Performance measures

The Association of State Correctional Administrators has expressed an interest in developing and using corrections performance indicators to describe, measure, and compare the management of corrections populations. For the following reasons, that goal is beyond the scope of this Inventory project. First, performance indicators in general are tied to the mission, goals, and objectives of organizations. Comparative corrections performance indicators would have to consider the varying missions, legal structures, and organizational arrangements of corrections departments throughout the country. The standardization of measures that take such factors into account is extremely complex. Second, standard or traditional approaches to measuring corrections performance, such as those that use the crime-rate related concepts of recidivism, deterrence, and incapacitation, are difficult to measure and interpret. More importantly, these indicators establish a standard for corrections performance that is based on what happens outside of prison or beyond the scope of corrections supervision. For example, an offender on release in a community is subject to many factors that are beyond the control of corrections. Even if this offender commits a crime while under supervision, the measure of the recidivism rate is related to the performance of the police, prosecutors, and judges in apprehending, convicting and sentencing offenders.

Third, alternative approaches to measuring corrections performance, such as those proposed in several papers in the Bureau of Justice Statistics *Performance Measures for the Criminal Justice System*, provide a useful starting point for developing corrections indicators that are tied to specific and shared corrections goals. These alternatives limit the mission and goals of corrections to the activities and outcomes that are within the scope of control of corrections. For example, in his article on “Criminal Justice Performance Indicators for Prisons,” Charles Logan² develops a series of measures for prisons that are tied to a confinement model of prisons. In this model, Logan identifies the mission of prisons as “keeping prisoners,” keeping them in, safe, in line, healthy, and busy and doing this without undue suffering and as efficiently as possible.³ From this, he derives measures of performance that are related to security, safety, order, care, activities, justice (as fairness), conditions (without undue suffering), and management. Each indicator can be tied to the effort of corrections officials.

Similarly, in her article about community corrections in the same volume, Joan Petersilia echoes many of Logan's sentiments. Petersilia argues that performance indicators for community corrections should be based on: (1) an articulate mission statement for community corrections; (2) a clear statement of the goals

²Logan, Charles H., Ph.D., “Criminal Justice Performance Indicators for Prisons,” in *Performance Measures for the Criminal Justice System*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-143505, 1993: pp. 19-59.

³Logan, p. 25.

contained within the mission statement; (3) specific methods or activities that address each goal; and (4) measurable indicators of performance for each goal.⁴ She also stresses that the performance and success of community corrections should “reflect only activities that occur *while the offender is formally on community corrections status, not beyond*” [emphasis original].⁵

While much of the work related to developing corrections performance indicators must be done by a deliberative body that can address the complexities described above, the Inventory may be useful in developing indicators in several ways.

The Inventory points to areas of commonality. The Inventory results show that for many important areas of corrections processing, many departments collect roughly comparable data. This is reason for optimism. If many or most departments have the raw material needed to develop performance indicators, then embarking on an effort to measure and compare performance could be reasonably successful.

The Inventory shows that the common core reflects experience. The common core of data is based on what departments currently collect, and performance indicators may be developed from these experiential core data elements. While the experiential core may show what departments can measure more easily, indicators that are measured by data elements that fall outside of the common core can also provide departments with guidance in expanding data collection.

The Inventory points to the need for precise definitions. While many departments collect roughly comparable data in many important areas, departments may still define data elements differently or they may use different categories to record data about offenders. Comparative performance indicators need to be defined precisely and the differences in definition of data elements assessed.

The Inventory points to the need to look at sources of non-comparability. While there is much commonality in what is collected, there are sources of non-comparability in corrections data. These derive primarily from differences in definition, scope of coverage, and methods for counting and classifying offenders. For example, definitions of a prisoner may differ among departments that include offenders in halfway houses or jails, and those that exclude them. And differences in defining sentences confound simple comparisons of time served or the percent of sentence served. Further, differences in methods for classifying offenders—e.g., by offense category, method of commitment, or other

⁴Petersilia, Joan, “Measuring the Performance of Community Corrections,” in *Performance Measures for the Criminal Justice System*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-143505, 1993: pp. 61-85.

⁵Petersilia, p. 74.

classes of offenders—need to be considered when interpreting comparative indicators. Any set of comparative corrections performance measures that are developed would have to be assessed empirically in relation to these and other sources of non-comparability in measurement among departments.